

The Forgotten Trinity

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I. Remembering and forgetting

"If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right arm forget her cunning." The psalmist was making a fairly extreme promise or request, for, disabling injury and great age apart, right hands do not forget their cunning. A musical skill once mastered is never forgotten, even though practice may be needed to restore it after periods of neglect. Something truly learned becomes part of us, and never, in one respect, forgotten. But it can be forgotten in other respects, in the sense that it can be crowded out of our conscious minds by other preoccupations and concerns. The title, *The Forgotten Trinity* was chosen by the British Council of Churches' Study Commission largely for reasons of what now, and probably then, would be called marketing: a way of attracting public attention so that the reports were read – or at least, bought. But, unlike many marketing ploys, it contained a good deal of truth. In what way?

My allusion to the impossibility of forgetting a skill was designed to make the point that there are different ways of forgetting. We may never forget the skill of choosing, writing and posting greeting cards, but may need to enter little Mary's birthday on a calendar if we are to remember to employ that skill when it is needed. So it is that the Western Church has each year a Sunday devoted to the Trinity, lest we forget. The Eastern Orthodox Churches do not, because their worship and thought is so steeped in trinitarian categories that they do not need to be reminded. Have we in the West of Christendom effectively forgotten the Trinity, so that we need to be reminded? Or is the trinitarian teaching like a skill, which is there but needs to be revived from time to time? Or – worse – does the difference between East and West suggest that we never really acquired it, and put the thing on a calendar once a year to awaken otherwise forgetful preachers into the realisation that this one Sunday in the year at least they must try to make

sense of a sleeping dog they would rather leave alone? For Eastern Orthodoxy, I think it is true to say that their trinitarian belief is like the skill of a musician. It so permeates their being that they worship and think trinitarianly without, so to speak, having to think about it – rather in the way that musicians don't think about what their hands are doing; their skills are so written into their bodies that they need only concentrate on the music and what it means. The point underlying the illustration is this. Theological teaching is not an end in itself, but a means of ensuring that it is the real God we worship, the real God before whom we live. That is the point of the doctrine of the Trinity above all, as we shall see.

What of the West? Here the story becomes complicated. On the face of it, we once had the same way of living in the Trinity, but have lost it, through a number of influences. Our hymns and blessings are steeped in trinitarian imagery: "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit..." – that ascription of glory to God wonderfully described by Erik Routley as the triumph song of the redeemed. Go to the National Gallery, or to places like Florence, and you will see that once upon a time we were a deeply trinitarian culture: a long tradition of representations of the triune God shows at least that. But partly as the result of rationalist criticism, that has come under attack. When the doctrines of the church came under fire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was the Trinity that was most savagely attacked as the most absurd and pointless of the many apparently untenable beliefs of the Christian tradition. Reason, so it was claimed, taught that there was only one God; any elaboration on that was simply priestcraft and superstition. That is surely one reason why we have tended to forget, or have become rather embarrassed by the whole thing. Something of those attacks has entered the bloodstream of even the orthodox believer, so that we feel that there must be something in the critiques.

Yet there is a case to be made that things have never been as they ought, that the West never had its piety and worship deeply enough embedded in trinitarian categories. The Study Commission was often given reason to wonder whether, although trinitarian belief has always been a yardstick of authentic Christian belief, the church had ever really attained the crucial grade 5 at which things are supposed to stick. A number of theologians have commented on various aspects of the problem. Karl Rahner asserted that in Roman Catholic manuals of dogmatics interest was effectively so concentrated on the one God that everything we need to know about God seemed to have been decided before the reader comes to the Son and the Spirit. For practical piety, he said, the Trinity had become

irrelevant. One test is this: Do you think that you know to all intents and purposes who and what kind of being God is quite independently of what you learn in trinitarian teaching? In many cases, that seems to be the case, particularly in the deeply entrenched tendency to begin with philosophical definitions of God. The threeness seems somehow additional, merely a Christian addition to a generally accepted doctrine of God.³⁷

But this is not simply a matter of theological teaching, important though that is. The worship of the church is first of all praise of the God who has created and redeems us; but it is also the way we learn a kind of skill, the art of living. And the same question can be asked again. Is the worship of the church truly informed by trinitarian categories? Do we think it matters? The Study Commission was taught some interesting truths here, particularly by the inestimable privilege of having some fine Eastern Orthodox theologians sharing in our thinking. They enabled us to notice that ASB rarely finds a place for the Holy Spirit in the wording of its prayers, while in its great predecessor, the *Book of Common Prayer*, that handbook of so much English piety, the Holy Spirit scarcely makes an appearance in the collects. Similarly, Western orders for the Lord's Supper have usually omitted the epiclesis, the prayer to the Spirit asking him to bless the bread and wine and the people. If the Spirit is absent from the structuring of the worship, can a rite be truly trinitarian? Is the reason that the Trinity has been effectively forgotten is that it has never really entered the bloodstream of the church, so that there is *too little* to remember? And does this make a difference to that most important of all human skills, the art of living before God, with our neighbour and in the created world?

The suggestion behind all this is that a truly trinitarian framework for our worship and life has rarely been found in the life of the Western Christian church; that we have forgotten because we never really remembered. The result is that on the face of it, and it is the suspicion of so many Christians, professional and lay alike, the doctrine of the Trinity is a piece of abstract theorising, perhaps necessary as a test of Christian belief, but of little further interest. All that stuff about three in one and one in three tends to leave us cold. Does it not turn God into a mathematical conundrum? All those dreary attempts to show that three can really be one, all those unconvincing illustrations from the natural world or the workings of the mind: do they really contribute to the learning of that skill in

³⁷ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, translated by Joseph Donceel (London: Burns and Oates, 1970).

living that is promised for those who follow the crucified Lord? Can we not get on quite adequately without this piece of theoretical baggage? That defines our problem: the relation between theology and life.

II. Thinking trinitarianly

That this is not a matter of mathematics is shown by the way the doctrine of the Trinity developed. The New Testament shows quite clearly that the first Christians, who were almost universally Jews also, had no difficulty in believing that the God they worshipped through Jesus was the same as the one they had always known. They did not find a new God, but a new and living way of knowing him. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, for those who had been given eyes to see, their Christ was everywhere present in the pages of what we now call the Old Testament, as was the Spirit of God who brought them to the Father through Jesus. The threefold patterning of their relation to God was nowhere more clearly explained than in the Fourth Gospel, though it is to be found elsewhere also. For this writer, as for others, a renewed relationship to God is given to sinful men and women through the action – mediation – of Jesus, the eternal creating Word of God become flesh. After the end of his earthly career, this redeemed relationship is realised by the Spirit, who relates people to the Father through Jesus, now ascended to be eternally with the Father. New Testament trinitarianism is about life; that is to say, about access to God through Jesus Christ and in the Spirit. Through Christ, „we both“ – Jew and Gentile – „have access to the Father by one Spirit“ (Eph. 2:18). One of the things I want to suggest in this lecture is that the crucial missing link in so much of the trinitarianism which has bored us off the doctrine is a demonstration that worshipping and thinking in a trinitarian way makes all the difference to our finding our place in the world. Developing doctrines of the Trinity, though that has its proper place, can only come in the light of what can be called concrete trinitarian thinking.

Let me give three examples of what I mean, the first two fairly brief, the third at greater length. When I was first taught the theology of the Reformers, it was by an Anglican, the late G. V. Bennett. He said something that has never left me: that Calvin is the greatest theologian of the West, Augustine not excepted, by virtue of the thoroughly trinitarian structure of his thinking. What is interesting here is that Calvin's explicit treatment of the Trinity is confined to one chapter of his great work. But everywhere his thought is structured by it, and nowhere

more effectively than in his definition of faith: „a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.“ (3. 2. 7). That tells us on whom faith rests – God the Father – how he mediates it to us – through Christ – and how it is impressed upon our hearts. The trinitarian structure enables Calvin to explore something of the richness of our relation to God, not only in this context, but throughout his work. Indeed, it is when he forgets to think in that way that the notorious flaws in his work begin to show themselves – but that is another question we unfortunately cannot pursue here.

The second example comes from Basil, bishop of Caesarea in the fourth century AD, and was given me in a recent book by Ellen Charry, called *By the Renewing of your Minds*, and, more importantly, perhaps, subtitled *The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine*.³⁸ Basil wrote a quite technical book on the Holy Spirit and his place within the Trinity. And why? It was partly, and only partly, to contribute to the intellectual debates about the being of God that were raging at the time. This author points out that there was a major pastoral problem as well. Despite Basil’s careful preaching, the lives of the people in his churches were not being renewed in the gospel. He was particularly concerned that after feast days, his flock were indulging in drunkenness and the resulting licentiousness and debauched behaviour. To put it simply, Basil wanted to develop the whole worship of the church to embody the reality of the Trinity, so that the people would not just be preached at, but trained in holiness. To this effect, he was concerned to show his readers something of the depth, range and richness of God’s gracious involvement in the world, and so to incorporate in their worship that it shaped them in holiness of life. It is that „range and richness of God’s gracious involvement in the world“ of which Professor Charry speaks that is the demonstration of the fruitfulness of trinitarian ways of thinking.

That is nowhere better demonstrated than in our third example, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon towards the end of the second century AD. Irenaeus too was involved in a struggle that was both theological and pastoral. At stake theologically was the doctrine of creation – something with which we are ourselves concerned in these days of ecological anxiety. Irenaeus was opposing the views of those

³⁸ Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of your Minds. The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

who claimed that this material world of our daily experience was not the creation of, or the concern of, the high god, but at best the bungling effort of an inferior deity, mediated through a world of intermediate and inferior angelic beings. Irenaeus' denial of this is absolute. God cares enough for this material world to become part of it through his Son and to continue to work in it through his Spirit. God does not keep the world at arm's length, for he created it himself: not through intermediaries, but through the Son and the Spirit, who are God himself in action.

Why did all this matter pastorally and morally? Irenaeus was the proponent of a biblical view that we are created to glorify God with our whole persons, body and soul alike. The Christian life was not an escape from the material world, but a calling to live in and through it redemptively. He was in this doing no more than follow Paul's urging of the Roman Christians to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. His opponents believed that what they did in their bodies was an irrelevance, so that, as he pointed out, they were led to contradictory practices, some of them indulging in license, others in extreme asceticism – and for the same reasons. If our bodies are not really ourselves, it matters not whether we crush them under a weight of harsh discipline or abuse them in self indulgence. Are things any different today? The British Methodist theologian, Geoffrey Wainwright, has written as follows:

We live in a very sensate and sensualist society. We are in some ways absorbed in our senses, a people defined by materialism and sexuality. Yet in other ways we are curiously detached from our bodies, as though we are not really affected by what happens to us in our bodies or what we do in them.

He proceeds to draw the conclusion that this is essentially the same as it was for Irenaeus:

If our bodies are not us, then we are not responsible in and for them; and that irresponsibility may assume the character of either license or, indeed, of withdrawal.³⁹

Wainwright has put his finger on the root cause of much of the modern world's sheer incapacity to live in the body, with all the human damage which results. Let me suggest another symptom of the same modern disease. We are in

³⁹ Geoffrey Wainwright, *For Our Salvation: Two Approaches to the Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997), 16f.

our world subordinating the life of persons to the impersonal demands of market forces. Our world is materialistic, indeed, and yet in a way that completely misunderstands the true being of the material. Instead of living in it as God's gift, we use it in a way that subverts rather than enhances the way in which personal beings are created to live with one another and in God's good creation. I shall return to the theme of the personal later.

What has all this to do with the Trinity? Let us follow through this great theologian's logic. If you were to ask him how God works in the world, what are the means by which he creates and redeems it, Irenaeus would answer: God the Father achieves his creating and redeeming work through his two hands, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Now this is an apparently crude image, but is actually extremely subtle. Our hands are ourselves in action; so that when we paint a picture or extend the hand of friendship to another, it is we who are doing it. According to this image, the Son and the Spirit are God in action, his personal way of being and acting in his world – God, we might say, extending the hand of salvation, of his love to his lost and perishing creation, to the extent of his only Son's dying on the cross. Notice how close this is to the way in which we noticed John speaking in his Gospel. The Son of God, who is one with God the Father, becomes flesh and lives among us. This movement of God into the world he that loves but that has made itself his enemy is the way by which we may return to him. The result of Jesus' lifting up – his movement to cross, resurrection and ascension – is the sending of the Holy Spirit – „another paraclete“, or second hand of God the Father. The Spirit is the one sent by the Father at Jesus' request to relate us to the Father through him. Irenaeus takes this understanding of God's working and uses it to engage with one of the first great challenges to the Christian worldview, a challenge that is with us still. He is important because his trinitarian vision of God's creation and redemption of the whole world, both spiritual and material, has much to teach us both about sexual ethics, and personal relations more generally, and about ecological ethics: on what we do with our bodies in relation to one another and in relation to our world.

In sum, the lesson we can learn from our three examples is this: if you want to understand how God works in our world, then you must go through the route God himself has given us: the incarnation of the eternal Son and the life-giving action of the Spirit. Let me repeat: the Trinity is about life. Irenaeus is the writer of that great sentence, often heard from him: the glory of God is a human being truly alive. The Trinity is about life, life before God, with one another and in the

world. If we forget that God's life is mediated to us trinitarianly, though his two hands, the Son and the Spirit, we forget the root of our lives, of what makes for life and what makes for death. In my third section, I want to take this further, and ask whether we need to do any more than this. Do we need also to go into the complications of whether, and in what sense, God is Trinity, in his eternal being, so to speak?

III. A doctrine of the Trinity?

Irenaeus thought trinitarianly, but did not yet have a developed doctrine of the Trinity. That is to say, he did not spend time discussing in what sense Father, Son and Spirit are all God, yet together are one God. Do we need that? In particular, are all the convolutions into which later theologians were and are led necessary? Perhaps not all of them, but a number of questions remained unanswered. Irenaeus understands clearly that God the Father achieves his purposes in the world through his Son and Spirit. But he has not concerned himself with *the* question which became unavoidable. Who is the God who identified himself in such a distinctive and personal way? It was in approaching questions like this that later theologians developed what we call the doctrine of the Trinity. What is its point? The best way to answer this question is to attempt to outline what the doctrine of the Trinity says. By means of summaries, I shall try to identify the heart of the matter.

1. God the Son – the one made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth – and God the Spirit are as truly God as God the Father who sends his Son into the world and pours out his Spirit on all flesh. That, of course, is a taking of Irenaeus' point one stage further. If God is like this in his action and presence with us; if it is through Jesus and the Spirit that he makes himself known; if they truly are his hands, God in personal action; then that is what he is always like. God does not tell lies. What you see is what you get. If God works among us through his two hands, it is argued, then the Son and the Spirit belong intrinsically to his eternal being. In some way, therefore, God must be Father, Son and Spirit always, to the heart of his being. The doctrine of the Trinity is the doctrine that attempts to do just that: to identify the God who comes among us in the way that he does; to say as much as we are allowed of the nature of our God.

2. All this is done without in the least wanting to suggest that the unity of God is in any way impugned. All the arguments were, and still are, about how to avoid slipping into two equal and opposite errors: of making God so blankly

singular that he loses the richness and plurality of his being – and so that “range and richness of God’s gracious involvement in the world” – or of so stressing the threeness that there seem to be three gods. There is not, that is to say, some divine stuff that is made known sometimes as Father, sometimes as Son and sometimes as Spirit or in some way lies behind them; rather, together they are so bound up with one another’s being that they are the one God. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit together make up all that there is of the being of God. That is another implication of the fact that God’s presence among us is real. What you see is what you get. „Everything is what it is and not another thing“, as Bishop Butler famously remarked. God is this particular kind of being, and not the gods of the heathen or of our human projections about what we think God ought to be like. He is one God only in this way, to be loved, worshiped and praised in the unutterable richness of his being - and it is no accident that so many of our confessions of worship have taken trinitarian form.

3. The relation of plurality and oneness is expressed with the help of one of the most central concepts, and indeed, one invented by trinitarian theologians, that of the person. Each of the three, Father, Son and Spirit, is so described, that, to use the traditional language, God is one being in three persons. That is where our real difficulties, but also our opportunities begin. In our everyday language, three persons seem to mean three separate beings. If this is the case with God, does it mean that there are three gods, linked together as a kind of family? Here we must take a detour to look more carefully at this central notion, which is the unique and indispensable contribution made to the world by the early trinitarian thinkers. I shall look at the matter through a discussion of what we mean when we speak of a human person.

What is a human being? We have already met one answer in the theories of those whom Irenaeus opposed. For them, human beings were bits of soul-stuff imprisoned in a gross material body, which was so unimportant that it did not really matter what they did with it. This is a variation on a very common ancient view. The body is a tomb, said the Pythagoreans, and Socrates appears to have agreed with them. Salvation, true life, therefore, is about escaping from the world of matter into the higher world of spirit. But is that only an ancient view? Is our culture so different? We have already heard Geoffrey Wainwright’s observation on this, and there are two ways in which our continuity with that ancient view can be illustrated. Suppose, it is often asked, that a computer could think. Would it be a person? The assumption in that question is that to be a person is to be a

mind: thought is what makes us human. It is an assumption that is almost universally made in our world. But are we not hearts as well as heads, bodies as well as minds? Could even a thinking machine be said to love? Can we truly relate to other human beings without a body – without eyes, vocal chords, hands and arms? Our civilisation continues to be deeply confused about the nature of life, especially human life, because we are confused about what personal being truly is.

And the second example is this. We live in a deeply individualist culture, marked by the fact that the market likes to think of us as units of consumption rather than as persons who belong together. Think of the everyday use of the word „relationship“. Is it not generally assumed that human beings are individuals who go around seeking relationships; and if one seems not to work very well, giving it up and trying another? Lesslie Newbigin used to say that the idea of self-fulfillment is the myth of the modern world. That, of course, is why children are often the last to be thought of when marriages break up. We are not here to be for others; rather, we use the world and others as the route to our individual self-fulfillment. In our world, it is not much of an exaggeration to say that we have lost the sense that we belong with one another: that we are the people we are because we are the children of particular parents, the wives and husbands of particular people – and, just as important in another way, fellow members of the people of God. We have our being not as individuals but because of what we give to and receive from God and from one another. We are only what God and other people enable us to become, or, indeed, prevent us from becoming. "No man is an island, entire of itself..." To be a person is something more than being a mind encased in flesh or an individual seeking our own self-fulfillment. It is to be one whose being is bound up with other persons. But how do we know and, more important, *practice* this?

Among the great achievements of those who have thought trinitarianly is the concept of the person as a living whole rather than as a mind encased in matter. How it came about is a complicated and difficult matter to describe, but it is one of the fruits of the trinitarian teaching that God is three persons in one being. By thinking about the Trinity, the early theologians came to realise that they had come across an entirely new conception of what it is to be personally. To be is not to be an individual; it is not to be isolated from others, cut off from them by the body that is a tomb, but in some way to be bound up with one another in relationship. Being a person is about being from, and for and with the other. I need

you – and particularly those of you who are nearest to me – in order to be myself. That is the first thing to say: persons are beings who exist only in relation – in relation to God, to others and to the world from which they come.

And there is a second thing to say, a pitfall to be avoided on the other side also. If our relations with each other are to be truly personal, they cannot take the form of coercion either. Being a person is not simply to be a part of a greater whole, of simply existing for the collective, for the nation or for the market. We are not simply „a piece of the continent, a part of the maine...“ Our otherness and particularity is important, too. To be a person is not only to live from and for others; it is also to be uniquely what we are – ourselves and not identical with others. The two aspects are not contradictories that have to be somehow reconciled, as if everything done for another person has to be in some way thought of as contradictory of our own self-fulfillment. That is, of course, the case in our fallen condition. As sinful human beings, we don't want to bother with the other, except as the object of our needs, someone to be exploited. But the order of creation, our personal being, is that we cannot be ourselves without others. Breaches of this order are what we call sin because they arise from a distorted relation to our creator, and so a false relation to one another. The triune God's gracious dispensation is that we need each other if we are to be truly and particularly ourselves.

One of the things of which much has been made in recent writing about the Trinity is that this view of persons as being from and for and with one another in their very otherness contrasts with both of the dominant theories of social order in the modern world: the individualist, that we are like atoms which are only accidentally related to other human beings; and the collectivist, which makes us simply exist for the sake of the whole, as in communism. It may appear, with the collapse of much of the communist world, that the latter danger has disappeared. But that is far from being the case. For all its apparent pluralism, the world of the market that so dominates our lives is actually working to make us all identical: all to drink coca cola and to eat at Macdonald's, those symbols of the homogenising forces of modernity, all to wear the same only superficially different designer clothes. That is simply another way of swallowing us up into a whole, of effectively depriving us of our individuality. Personal being is precisely what is at stake in this modern world. Wherever we look the many – particular people with all their differences – are depersonalised by being swallowed up into the one, the mass, where individuality is suppressed in the interests of efficiency, economics and

homogeneity: where babies with a risk of handicap are killed in the womb because we don't want to bother with those who are different, and where all have cosmetic surgery so that we all look alike. (I exaggerate, but only for the sake of allowing certain trends to come into view).

Over against this, the triune God is a God in whom the one is not played against the many, nor the many against the one. In the words of John Zizioulas – though he is only interpreting the fourth century Greek theologians – God is one who has his being in communion.⁴⁰ Now the word communion, and more especially its associated word community, is on many a lip these days, and therefore has to be interpreted very carefully. Certainly there are supposed „communities“ many of whose members do not know each other from Adam, the very opposite of what is intended here. (I recently saw an advertisement referring to 'the academic community', to take an example at random.) The point about the communion that is the Trinity is that in God the three persons are such that they receive from and give to each other their unique particularity. They have their being in relation to one another. The Son is not the Father, but receives his being from him; the Father cannot be the Father without the Son; and so on. Being in communion is a being that belongs together, but not at the expense of the particular existence of the members. The Father, Son and Spirit are persons because they enable each other to be truly what the other is: they neither assert at the expense of nor lose themselves in the being of the others. Being in communion is being that realises the reality of the particular person within a structure of being together. There are not three gods, but one, because in the divine being a person is one whose being is so bound up with the being of the other two that together they make up the one God.

There are, to be sure, differences between divine and human persons, and we need to spend some time looking at this also. It is one thing to be the creator, quite another to be beings created in the image of God. This means that the differences between divine and human persons are as important as the similarities. First, we are created persons, and created out of the material world – out of the dust of the earth, to which we return. As we have seen, this is not something to be regarded negatively. The Son of God became one of us, thus marking and restoring our proper place in God's purposes. We are therefore

⁴⁰ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985).

made for particular kinds of relationships, those especially that respect the kinds of beings that we are. We are not God, and so not bound up together in the same way, only in a way appropriate to our createdness. The point of the notion of created persons is the immense range and variety of human beings, and the immense range of relationships in which we stand. It is easy to illustrate. Our relationships with our immediate family are different from those with whom we worship, and different again from our relationship with the social worker or the builder. Particularity means precisely that: a vast range of ways of being and of being in relationship, all of which are in different ways personal – or should be. As we have seen, so many of the ways of being in our modern world deny our personal being in ways which distort our relation to each other and the world. Here, God's triune personal being stands as a model for ours: a being in which all accept their need of one another, while enabling all to be truly themselves.

And that takes us to a second point. How that is realised through the saving work of Christ and its embodiment in the church would take another lecture: but the point must be made. We need not only a model of personhood, but the means for its redemption and realisation. As things are, we fail in our relationships, not only with people but with the world in general. Because it is through the eternal Son of God that the world was created and is upheld, it is through his incarnation and reign with God the Father that personal being is redeemed and reshaped. The church as the body of Christ is the human community called so to order its life with and before the triune God that it becomes a school of personal being – a place where, among other things, we learn to be with, from and for one another. Life in communion is one of the gifts of God the Spirit, as again and again is made clear in scripture.⁴¹

4. And that brings me to the fourth and final thing I want to say about the doctrine of the Trinity. The three persons who make up the being of God; who, together, *are* the one God, are bound up together in such a way that only one word can be used to describe their relation: love. God is love says 1 John chapter 4, and the doctrine of the Trinity is that teaching which shows something of what that means. Notice that this chapter is already implicitly trinitarian. „This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that

⁴¹ The person, as John Zizioulas has also pointed out, is an eschatological conception, in the sense that it is something held out in promise, only more or less successfully realised this side of eternity, and only through the mediating work of the Son and the Spirit.

we might live through him... We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit" (vv. 9, 13). In the end the doctrine of the Trinity is only worth remembering if it enables us to know – both theoretically and practically – something of the truth of the Bible's God: of who the God is who meets us in Jesus Christ and his Spirit.

Much is made of the fact that many moderns have rejected God because the God of the church seemed the source of unfreedom and oppression rather than of love. We know, of course, that the God rejected by many an atheist is not the one we know and worship. Yet there is something in the charges, in the fact that our civilisation stands so uneasily towards its religious past. The church has failed to practice the Trinity. There are many ways of forgetting who is the true source of our life, and we are guilty of some of them. Without the doctrine of the Trinity we might have a God of power, or a God in some way identical with the world, but not the God of the Bible, who is a God of love, and whose love takes shape in the story of creation and redemption.

I began the lecture by alluding to skills and the practice of art. Craftsmen and artists live by their skills, which they have learned so thoroughly that they have become part of their very bodies, their tools and musical instruments extensions of their very persons. The church lives by a kind of skill, if it can be metaphorically so described, or better, by a way of being towards God and in the world. It is called love, and is founded above all in worship, the worship of the Father through the Son that is enabled only by the gift of the Spirit. The point of all this theology is not that it is the whole of what we need, but that it is an indispensable part. If we do not know who our God is, then we shall not know how we are to grow like him - that was Basil's point in his discourse on the Spirit. Without the Trinity, we cannot know that God is love, but we do, for the doctrine of the Trinity is the teaching that God is love, not only towards us, but in his deepest and eternal being.⁴²

⁴² This article was first delivered as the William Hodgkins Lecture, Cardiff Adult Christian Education Centre, 5 June, 1998.